PRODIGAL

March 9, 1986, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

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"...while he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him..." --Luke 15:20 (RSV)

Scripture
Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

Older brothers and older sisters often feel cheated, and if not cheated, at least smug. There is something about parenting which makes the whole project more intense the first time around. The first child receives, and is subjected to, more parental attention, more rules, demands, and hopes than others who happen along. New parents are young and convinced that their offspring is not only unique but superior to all the others and that it is a sacred duty to maintain those high standards thereafter. Psychologists are interested in first children and the dynamics of their unique relationship with parents. Many Presidents were older brothers and, I am told, a majority of clergy are the eldest in their families.

What happens is that by the time a second, third or fourth child comes along parents are older, therefore wiser, perhaps more mature, not as insecure, maybe more relaxed, less intense, and probably better parents. Fortunately inexperience doesn't inflict permanent damage, but number two usually enjoys a slightly less rigid regimen, the rules are loosened a bit, parents no longer believe it is a matter of cosmic significance that the plates be entirely clean, or that the world will come to an end if the children don't practice the piano exactly thirty minutes per day and go to bed at 8:00 p.m.... All of which allows the oldest child to say: "When I was that age you made me eat the liver"..., or "I never got to miss a day of practice"..., or "you never let me watch television that late." It sounds like social protest but actually it feels good to be able to say these things.

The story which is our text today is for older brothers or sisters, literal or figurative. It is for the hard workers who never had a fling in the Far Country, but stayed at home, loyally, gladly, in order to get the job done. It is one of the most remarkable stories in the world.

I have never been able to discover who first called it the Parable of the Prodigal Son. In fact that title does not describe it adequately. It is a parable about prodigality and in a sense each of the three characters is prodigal. Prodigal means - "recklessly extravagant, characterized by wasteful expenditure, lavish, or yielding abundantly, luxuriant."

The younger son, of course, has received most of the attention. He is the most interesting character in the story. But if prodigality means

wasteful squandering, the older brother is the true prodigal. He is the character Jesus intended to dramatize, I believe. He represents unresolved tension and conflict when the story ends. There is a possibility for a happy ending with the younger boy, but the older brother is still outside, being angry as the curtain descends. It is the father, however, and his incredible love that energizes and dominates the story. It is, in the final analysis, about him.

There are two sons in this family and we know the older of the two before we meet him. We know that in this family there is a stable, hardworking heir apparent, who takes the stewardship of the farm and the herds very seriously, who is by his father's side every day and at his board each night. We know the special love the father has for his oldest son, his right-hand man.

The story introduces the younger son with his unusual request to his father, for his share of the estate. He wanted now what he would receive when his father died - not a very flattering introduction... Rudyard Kipling wrote an intriguing little poem about the story. Let him present the younger brother...

"My father grooms and advises me,
My brother sulks and despises me,
And mother catechizes me
'til I want to go out and swear"
[The Prodigal Son, Rudyard Kipling's Verse, Definitive Edition, pp. 580-581]

He had no legal claim on his inheritance. He had no right to ask, actually, part of us wants the father, in no uncertain terms, to tell this ungrateful son just how inappropriate his request is. The father, however, wordlessly and patiently, grants the request.

We don't know what preceded it, the many family dinners which deteriorated into an intramural contest between siblings, the violent arguments, the incessant challenges to parental authority.

Maybe that boy had to go. Maybe there was no way for him to discover who he was and what life is about in the long shadow of his older brother. In any event he went and he did all the things he used to dream about doing and after a while he made a discovery. The party is over when the money is gone. Reduced to poverty and despair, the story has him working on a hog farm - for a Jew the most degrading work on the face of the earth. He was so hungry he contemplated the swill.

It's probably a mistake to attribute what happens next to a streak of altruism in him. He simply remembers where there is plenty of food on the table. In fact, it becomes an obsession with him morning, noon and night - all that food, even on the servant's table at home. so he composes a speech as he feeds the hogs the main point of which is that he's sorry and he'll live in the town and work as a hired hand if he can just get back at that table. And then he heads out for home.

His older brother, meanwhile is still working hard: everyday, all day long. But it's not very pleasant at the dinner table because more often than not his father is misty-eyed, and conversation has been taking a morbid turn without anybody intending it, and he has to try very hard to be cheerful and optimistic and light.

Every morning the old man takes a walk before breakfast, down the road a bit, to the point where you can see through the valley for miles, and the son knows what he's doing. Lately, he's been taking the same walk at noon and again at dusk. He's watching that road like a hawk.

And then one day, in the heat of the noon sun, he lets out a shout and the older brother looks up from his hoe to see him flying down the road to meet the ragged but unmistakable figure coming the other way. In the near East men of substance ran nowhere. It was undignified; he should have waited. But he ran and the startled, filthy hog-hand started his speech but only got a few words out because his father's strong arms are around him. He doesn't say "I told you so." He simply embraces a son who was lost but is found, dead but is now alive, and orders a party. That is an incredibly powerful scene, the subject of hundreds of pictures and thousands of sermons.

Frederick Buechner who has written beautifully about this story observes that: "these parables can be read as jokes about God in the sense that what they are about is the outlandishness of God who does impossible things with impossible people. Is it possible," Buechner asks, "that it is only when you hear the Gospel as a wild and marvelous joke that you really hear it at all." [Telling the Truth, the Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy and Fairy Tale, pp. 66-68]

And so the celebration begins and the laughter and music carry out across the fields to where the older brother is finishing up for the day and he can't believe his ears... The more he thinks about it, the angrier he becomes - and the angrier he becomes the more impossible it is for him to walk down there and join that party. And after a while his father comes to him, knowing - as mothers and fathers do, exactly what is wrong, and asks him to join the party.

The older son, by this time, has himself in such a state of self-righteous resentment that he can't even be civil. He insults his father and launches into that time-honored older brother/sister litany, "all these years I've worked and you never gave a party for me." And then he shows his complete disdain by refusing even to acknowledge the ties of family: "this son of yours," not "my brother" but "this son" as in "your son broke a window this morning," or "your daughter wet the bed last night." "This son of yours has spent it all - he and his women." Buechner thinks he is guilty of all the deadly sins in his tirade: "Envy, pride, anger, covetousness, sloth - and lust - as he invokes even the prostitutes with whom his brother had been living." [p. 68]

In Kipling's poem the younger son leaves home again after the banquet,

this time for the right reasons.

The tragedy of this parable, and I believe it is a classic tragedy, is that the older son remains outside. Vermont Royster, wise editoralist and commentator on the national scene for the Wall Street Journal wrote a column recently under the title, "The Eighth Deadly Sin." Royster nominates one additional to the classic list of Seven Deadly Sins, - Self-righteousness. "The self-righteous person," according to Royster, "not only seeks the right way, but piously thinks it is his duty to compel others to follow the revealed path. The religious wars of history were rooted in self-righteousness." He concluded his column with this prayer, "From those who think they alone know what is right and good for everyone and who would force their will upon us all - good Lord deliver us." [Wall Street Journal, 2/26/86]

The older brother was self-righteous. It is easy to see that in the original he represents those self-righteous religious zealots who were so critical of Jesus and his associates for their persistent abrogation of religious law, those pious fanatics, "good men in the worst sense of the word" as Mark Twain put it, who hounded Jesus to his death.

It's easy to be self-righteous about self-righteousness. But in this story the father does not criticize nor argue with the elder son either. His father loves him, steadily, evenly, as always. But they don't embrace - the father and his oldest son don't. They can't . They gave up embracing when he was thirteen: when the boy started pulling back, because he didn't feel loved and forgot how to love, and stopped trying to love and started trying to earn his father's love - which is what he had been doing, working so hard out in the field, all those years. Classic tragedy here. Tragedy and the reality of the human condition in the sad heart of that pathetic son.

The most radical idea in Christian faith is the idea of grace. Religion always has trouble with it. Grace is the word the theologians assign to the truth millions upon millions of people have discovered over twenty centuries, that in Jesus Christ God loves them: that God's love has no strings attached to it. It cannot be earned. It cannot be shut off, deterred. It cannot be escaped. God loves us as we are. God loves for what we are and in spite of what we are. There is nothing we can do to make God love us less. God loves when no one else does. God loves us when we are unlovable. God loves us when we cannot stand ourselves.

The idea is slightly offensive to us. We like to pull our own weight and earn our own way. If we are loved by God, or by anyone else for that matter, we'd like to think it's because we have made ourselves so lovable. We are offended by the suggestion that we actually haven't earned or deserved God's love. We have trouble with the suggestion that God loves the scoundral as much as us.

We believe that love is negotiable. How much you get depends on how much you earn. Paul Tournier, psychologist and physician wrote, "from infancy on all trauma is connected with the doubt about being loved. The

child has the impression that his parents' love is conditional: that they will love him on the condition that he is good." [Guilt and Grace, p. 189]

Tournier and other thinkers who bring together theological skill with psychological sensitivity have taught that basic human fear that we will be deprived of love unless we work very hard at earning it becomes a powerful behavioral dynamic. We believe that we must earn, and demonstrate our worth by succeeding, getting ahead, doing better than the competition. In theological language, we are inclined to believe that God will love us on the condition that we are good, and life becomes a grim and determined effort to measure up, to prove oneself, to earn public esteem which is the only way we can feel personal esteem. That's what is going on in this parable.

That's what happened to the older brother in the story and that is what the story intends to emphasize: grace and the inability of most of us to cope with it: to relax and enjoy the salvation God has given. The story inverts the religious sequence. Ordinarily we believe that the separation between ourselves and God is a result of our sin: that confession and penetance on our part stimulates God's forgiveness and the separation is closed. This story suggests that it is God's love that calls confession out of us. That the love of God comes before our repentence - is responsible for any sense of sin we might have.

It is a helpful dynamic in human relations. children need to be loved precisely when they are most unlovable. When love depends on the sinner repenting, love sometimes never has an opportunity to make its appearance. We need love, precisely when we are in the Far Country, or sulking in the fields while someone else's party is going on.

We know, I think, what it is to be separated. We may never have been as spectacularly prodigal as the young son, but we know, I think, what it means to be in a Far Country; the self-inflicted isolation from the love of spouse and friend, or family, or God. We know, perhaps even better, what it means to be in the self-inflicted exile of the older brother, the Far Country of feeling unloved, unwanted, and that particular loneliness of spending the currency of one's life in an effort to feel worthy. The older brother remains outside as the story ends. He was invited to the banquet table, but he could not go in. We know how that feels. Convinced that his personal worth depended on the work he produced, he couldn't stop long enough to enjoy, his father's love, couldn't even feel his father's love.

The good news here is that both sons are invited to the banquet. The good news is that our worth as persons is a product, not of the work we do, the accomplishments we achieve, or the amount of money we earn. Our worth as persons regardless of who we are, is a product of God's love for us.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is a message different from any of the messages you and I are likely to hear this week. It is that the God who made us and gave us life and put us here, wants us to know that we are loved, wants us to live in the glorious freedom of children who have no

reason to doubt their mother's love, wants us to be so overwhelmed by that love that we live out our lives in laughter and tears of happiness over the suprising wonder of it. The Gospel is that God regards that to be worth the life of an only Son: that God will never let us forget it, will, in fact, follow us, pursue us into whatever Far Country we stray.

The elder brother, working in the field, sweating, boiling in resentment and wounded pride and frustrated love, heard music - the music of a homecoming celebration from his father's house. It tugged at his heart, but he would not and could not and did not join the banquet. We don't, of course, know what that music was, but it could have been "Amazing Grace" - for that is always the music at God's banquet.

Hear it today... God's music coming across the field, through the streets or down the hallway - or into your late night struggles with your own worth. Let it call you home: let it be for you, the music of reunion, the glad music of God's love and a Grace that is amazing, indeed! Amen.